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The Good News
Mary's Yes

December 2010



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The Good News: Winter 2010

Mary's Yes

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&
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In This Issue

Christmas Prayer

Spirit of Life,
Holy Child born this very moment
And born in every moment:
Gifts surround us—
not gifts of gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense,
not even gifts of Wii's or plasma screens,
but simple gifts, the ones that surround us,
the easiest gifts we have to give,
the most difficult gifts to understand
even while fear whispers to us:
fear tells us we should
live as if tomorrow no child will be born,
as though the stars will forget to shine.

Oh dear God, empires do decree death,
Their masters sell fear
And hunger really can gnaw at our bodies.
Wrap us tonight in comfort
A loving parent's embrace
Surrounds us all with adoration,
The empire of hope and peace surrounds us.
Let's make our own decree this Christmas:
We the people of your peaceful empire
proclaim our strength to face the gauntlets
we must each endure for ourselves.
We proclaim your love
by which we will embrace one another
comfort one another in sorrow,
celebrate with one another in joy.
We proclaim our courage'
to be a beacon in the darkness
when the world forgets the promise
that every night is a holy night
and every soul has the power to save another.
We proclaim it is Christmas—You are reborn among us:
We are the star that shines.
We are the Kings and Queens that bring gifts.
We are the animals and the herders.
We are the parents and we are you holy children.
Bless us every one because
we proclaim in faith Christmas has come.

—Joel Miller

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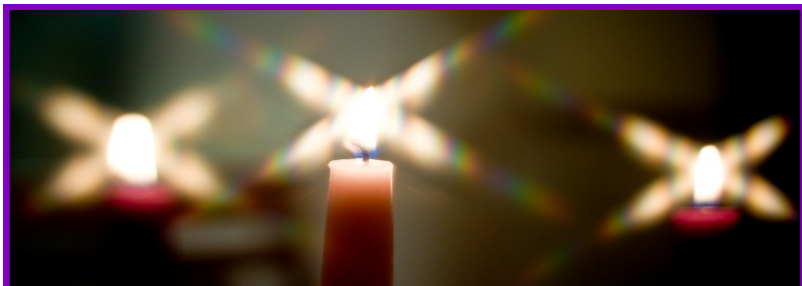
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Welcome to Advent and Christmas. This is the time when we focus on the story of how the most divine, the universal Love, God, becomes real and finite and fragile and vulnerable in a most particular person and place. We call it incarnation, a sacredness to the "fleshiness" of life itself. The things of the Spirit and the spirit of Things becoming one. I like to say that God is more than Jesus, and was among us long before Jesus, and in diverse ways, but that in the single shape of Jesus we see a fullness of God. Or as one of the children in my church asked: Is Jesus God's nickname? I loved that.

Two thousand years ago, and today still, this "divine messiness" was and is embarrassing to many who find comfort in keeping the "profound and the profane" separate, the sacred and the secular always at odds, locating religion as far away as possible, either all in the head, all in the heart, or all in the hands. Against all this, Advent says wait, something different is coming, is being born, and Christmas says look, see, touch, draw near, God can come where and in whom you least expect it, and probably in real messy and mixed up ways.

In her newest book, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*, Sara Miles captures well how her other liberal Christian friends, especially those unlike her who grew up in a church, shy away from the "realness" of Jesus, but how that reality can and should lead us to other difficult realities, and difficult people, that surely mess up our lives but who also bring God close to us. This season of incarnation is our time to reorient toward this real presence of Jesus and see what dusty road full of oppression and danger and disease he may call us who follow him.



And the Word was made Flesh

And the word was made flesh
sinews and blood
fingernails and teeth,
dreams splitting thoughts from
gray cells singing in the cranium of his being—
made baby to suck Mary's milk to live
and always the throbbing of the heart,
Beating like a drum thud,
telling the world
that a new dream had come,
filed with adrenalin and endorphins—
so that the anguished world could look
into the mirror of his face
and find
its
own

—Finley C. Campbell
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Mary's Yes

When the Shadow came,
She was feeling out of sorts that evening,
A tug in her belly, indigestion perhaps.

The rumors of her virtue made for a troubled rest,
Combing her hair to soothe the wagging fingers
And knowing glances of the widows in the market.

The open window betrayed a single star
Its warmth splashing her covers,
Reaching at last her face turned to see its perfect frame

Suddenly, the world went deaf save for the sound of wings
Rustling, like sheets on the line
Whispering 'round the room
The Power of the Most High will overshadow you.

What kind of blessing is this?
Is it a darkness that engulfs or a sea that sustains?
Is the light true or false?
Will the ending bring children and gladness?
Will shame be my cloak and grief my daily bread?

The shadow flickered and lengthened,
Then paused, as if waiting for an answer.
"My soul magnifies the Lord" was all she said
to no one in particular,
and not completely sure why she spoke at all.

The night's journey, now complete,
Recedes and retreats and chooses to bless,
The young woman who simply said, "yes."

—Kathleen C. Rolenz

She writes: "There's often a moment when I'm hanging out with a group of Christians--usually liberal Christians, the kind who care about global warming and inclusive language--and I see them glance at me as if I'm a total freak. I've embarrassed them by talking too much about Jesus. As if he were real.

Most Christians know so much more about the faith than I do. They grew up in Sunday School; they know their church's history and creeds by heart; some have even been to seminary and can read the Gospel in Greek. But when I tell them I met the risen Jesus in actual food, they often pull back a bit, as if I'd declared I saw the Virgin Mary on a tortilla. (Which, by the way, would make me very happy.) And when I tell them that Jesus said we can go ahead and heal the sick, that we don't have to wait for authorization from our bishops to raise the dead, they look worried.

...I still can't fully explain who the Boyfriend is, but I see him at work everywhere, still breathing in all kinds of people: poor men, crazy women, middle-class retired couples, little kids. They're feeding, healing, forgiving, raising the dead."

Sara Miles reminds us that incarnation doesn't have to happen in big ways, in momentous enterprises; in fact, the story of Christmas itself reminds us how it is the seemingly insignificant, the small act, that brings God into the world.

She says, "It doesn't take that much to feed. You don't have to run a food pantry, like Michael, and serve eight hundred people a week. You could start a nonprofit restaurant, like Anthony and Karen, or, like Debbie, give peanut butter sandwiches to homeless guys in the park. Or you could just invite a stranger to dinner.

It doesn't take that much to heal. You don't need to change careers and become a nurse like Lawrence or Martha; you could volunteer as a chaplain like Cheryl. Or you could just tell an addict the truth about your own addiction, hug a friend instead of giving him advice, sit with a dying woman and not try to pretend.

"It doesn't take that much to forgive. Well, to be honest, it does: it took me almost ten years to forgive someone who'd hurt

me. But then one afternoon, unprepared, I just gave up: what the hell, I thought; I wish him happiness.

"And raising the dead? This is what Christians do every Sunday, after all, when we stand around in our boring churches, eating little wafers or pieces of whole wheat pita, saying aloud that Christ is risen. It's what we do whenever we continue in simple, literal acts: breaking bread, praying without hope of perfect outcomes, admitting our weaknesses, and loving people who don't deserve it. It's what we do when we remember that death is not the end."

Advent and Christmas too, seasons of birth, are there to remind us that death is not the end, though many people and circumstances around us, and we ourselves, are dying during this time too, or feeling the melancholy or depression that seems so against the grain of what is forced on us by culture's myth-makers. Death in all its forms, whether that specific situation with an utmost focus on the bodies and the flesh and the finite and fragility, or whether death of a relationship or of a departure or big change in our lives---all these deaths can be transformed into new life. Certainly Advent is about how Mary had to die to an old way of her being, in order to live as this newly incarnated carrier of the divine.

And a key to this new life is that we are not alone. That insight is so key to the biblical story celebrated in Advent and Christmas too. When we are called to follow Jesus we form a community that makes community for others. This Advent and Christmas, may we in the UUCF become a part of your community of new life, sharing in your walk, inspiring one another to those simple little steps of incarnation, which taken together become a part of a bigger whole, a sharper shape of God that has been growing in the world since it first took shape in Mary's womb, in Jesus' life, and in the stories of those who followed him.

A

Allow me to settle my shoes by the door

My toes curling against a threadbare

woolen rug

Pass the cup of cider and bowl of thick soup

Light the candle above the mantle.

No, leave the TV off,

Let the stereo hunker in shadow

And listen instead to the wind and rain

Nodding these Douglas fir beyond the window.

Draw the comforter up,

Dog hair and spilled hot chocolate and all

And let your breath fall

On my scalp like prayer.

Oh, God,

Name me home.

—Kim Beyer-Nelson

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son and named him Jesus.—Matthew 1: 24-25



But just when he had resolved to do this (put Mary away from him), the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. . .



Violin, play
Horsehair and gut
and wood
Trinity of our own
selves,
Spirit, mind, body,
In kind
And discernment,
each note

Weaving and wedding
Until the angel nods in time as
Wood
Resolutions
Evolve.

*. . for the child conceived in her is
of the Holy Spirit."
—Matthew 1: 20*

The motto of The Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship is "*freely following Jesus.*" Far too often, because of our unique history, we tend to focus only on the "free" part, celebrating our religious freedom to think and to choose a variety of paths. But Advent season beckons us to focus on the "following" part of that motto; to concentrate on something we can do each day to be active in our walk with all those seeking to create a living shape of Jesus in our world today. And the Christmas season is our time to both celebrate but also ask ourselves the hard questions and pray about the Jesus part of the motto, who this Jesus is to us (an important question because of the many kinds

"Certainly Advent is about how Mary had to die to an old way of her being, in order to live as this newly incarnated carrier of the divine."

of Jesus around us) and where he is being incarnated in our lives and communities still today, and how we are called to respond.

I hope you will share your stories with us of what you discover, what you receive, this season. And I hope you will be called to walk with others of us as we freely follow Jesus through our main teams always seeking members: our publications ministries and website work, through our events ministries, through our communities and membership work, and through our support of this gift, the UUCF, which we have received ourselves, and now by supporting with our time, talent and treasure, offer to others.

Blessings, Ron Robinson
Executive Director, Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship





The Angelus as UU Christian Spiritual Discipline

Note: The Angelus Prayer is a Christian devotion in memory of the Incarnation. Repeated three times each day (morning, noon, and evening). Usually done in a call and response format, consisting of Scripture readings and Hail Mary prayers.

Advent is a season of preparation, of waiting for what we know is coming, but is not yet here. Historically, it anticipates the Incarnation which Christians celebrate at Christmas. Some Christians also attach it to the Reign of God, something that we believe is coming but is not-yet here in full.

One of the common practices for the seasons of preparation (Lent and Advent) is to adopt a spiritual discipline for the 40 days of the season. For myself, I find that looking to the ancient roots of Christian faith often helps me deepen my connection to God. As such, I have decided for Advent to take on the discipline of the *Angelus*.

Three times a day, no matter where I am, I am going to stop and recite Scripture, and pray. Why? I have been feeling distant and disconnected from my faith. My life is busy and full of intellectual things. I am a doctoral student, studying for the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (the credentialing body of the Unitarian Universalist Association) and writing a book. I am caught up in my head and need some heart connection.

As someone who grew up in the Protestant tradition, heart connections were hard to come by, since I was not exposed to spiritual disciplines beyond verbal, outward directed prayer and Bible reading. I thought that meditation, chanting,

The woman in the check out lane

flips the pages of the newest tabloid
shaking her head and clucking.
An aisle over, a man scratches
himself
and snuffs back snot with a hint of
satisfaction.
Behind me, a couple bickers about
cornflakes
dairy farming practices
and damp basements
while a young woman tagged
“Mary.”
fingers flying across the keypad,
refuses to look up.
I wonder
has she tried before
to catch a smile, a gracious hello
to share a secret eye to eye
over hamburger and broccoli?
But today,
She’s wed to the machine.
I wonder if she has awakened
something inside her,
so immense that she swells for someone
to touch her belly, reverently.
Perhaps, late at night,
the man she loves holds his fingertips
to her lips.
Ssshhhhh.
he thinks the people
who run though her checkout stand
will not
understand.



Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.—Matthew 1: 19

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. “

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.—Matthew 1: 18

Brilliant, Holy Spirit!

Of course Mary was virginal-
aren't we all?

We breathe in and capture the spark

the wriggling, photon-sperm,

And that first piercing of the veil,

rips open within us

Sticky, warm, bursting with cries and tight fists,

A bit of Inspiration, a bit of Mind

cartilage slow-firing into a bone of memory,

Subtle fanning veins of experience wed

To a heartbeat,

dreaming to walk upright like

Light spilling into snow and pines and glances,

Added like a Grandfather drum

To the circle of all creative becoming.



prayer beads and so forth were either 'New Age' or part of Eastern religions. Imagine my surprise when in college I encountered the depth of embodied spiritual disciplines within Christianity! I quickly incorporated various types of practice into my life, each adding and deepening my faith beyond the knowledge-centered traditions I grew up in.

I am not the only one to feel this way; many people who have left the Christian tradition, especially the Protestant churches, are attracted to Eastern spirituality with its integration of mind and body in spiritual practice, in part because they do not realize that breath work, movement, guided imagery and chanting are all parts of the Christian tradition as well. Without judging the merits of other religious approaches, I can say that nobody needs to leave Christianity to find these types of connection to the Divine, because they have existed for millennia within this tradition. The umbrella of belief, practice, and understanding called “Christianity” is quite wide and deep, and more inclusive than many would have you believe. So that is my reasoning for adopting a holistic spiritual discipline this Advent. But why did I pick the *Angelus*?

Three times a day

I am going to stop and recite scripture

Because the *Angelus*, like many ancient Christian disciplines, is meant to center the believer in the tradition, as well as encourage their personal and corporate faith development. It is simple, short, repetitive, very popular worldwide, and grounded in the Bible.

As part of my UU Christian journey I feel a need to reclaim ancient practices of faith for my modern, inclusive, and progressive journey. This Advent, with my non-traditional life, I will be joining with millions of other Christians throughout time and space as we reflect on what “God-with-us” can mean. I believe if

we are ever going to go beyond the divisions of the Christian faith, we must find some common practices that believers of different kinds can share. I do not know how to fix the many ways Christianity has been broken by all-too-human agendas and systems, but I do know that when we work together, pray together, sing together and hope together; the world is made just that little bit better.

Praying the *Angelus*, as a spiritual discipline, can deepen and inform our faith. However, there are gender-inclusive issues with the text as traditionally rendered from the Latin. As such, I tend to adapt the prayers for a more inclusive theology, just as the 'traditional' prayers have been adapted over time.

I have a couple of favorite *Angelus* texts I carry with me. By putting them into a purse or wallet friendly format, I hope to remind myself to pray during my busy day. I printed the small version out on card-stock, cut the two sides out, fit them together, and used a laminated card pouch from an office supply store to make it durable. If you choose to join me this Advent season in praying the *Angelus*, I hope that this practice adds to your life and mine, and I rejoice to know that around the world, despite our differences, Christians of all kinds are praying together this Advent season. Blessings to you! —*Claudia Hall*



Gestation.

A word for growing within.
Mary spent nine months gestating Jesus.
Did she have morning sickness in the beginning?
Did her back hurt, and feet ache?
Did she crave some foods and hate others?
As her stomach grew, did her steps slow to a waddle?
The new life growing within Mary is
the same miracle that comes to pass for each of us.

Something is coming.
Something is coming to us—all of us.
We wait with patience, with apprehension,
with excitement.
Our days of darkness are almost over;
our wait for the Light is nearly done.
When it comes, will we be ready?
Can we hold it in our hands, in our hearts?
Something is coming, and we must be ready
to enfold it within ourselves,
inside mere bodies.
It will come and be what we need,
when we need it.
We will welcome this Light
with joy and laughter, with singing
Something is coming and soon
we will see it,
But our eyes must be opened.
Our hearts must be unfastened as never before,
so we can see and feel and hear this Wondrous, Great Light.



Something is coming.

Gracious and loving God,
who moves within and through us
who made all of us in her and his image,
who looks just like me and everyone I meet,
who is with all these gestating lives,
open our hearts to every one of Your gifts. Amen.

O God of our longing
help us to see the coming.
The dark is so deep.
We can only see a little way, the Light so faint
While we wait, breathless.
O God we are so blind.
We seek patience and an end to ignorance
Open our eyes to the coming Light!

—*Jennifer Sandberg*

Weaving



It's a word that always comes to mind when I think about the energy that manifests prior to gestation. I work on rigid heddle, tri-looms and a four-harness tabletop looms, creating prayer shawls for my community. Even before that first thread is drawn through the eye of the reed, I tremble with impulse, hesitation, head scratching and color-figuring. I have to do MATH—this alone is usually a shift of consciousness for me—and I have to touch base with the pattern in my soul. In that planning, I finger secrets, fears, sorrow, anticipation, joy and raw excitement.

I think this must be how Mary felt, as she listened to the angel sketch the great creative act that needed only her assent.

Let us follow our path now into the womb, the creative center, recalling the heartbeat of Mary's Great Yes.

—*Kimberly Beyer-Nelson*



The Advent Promise

Responsive Reading

One: A shoot will come up from the stock of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit.

Many: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

One: The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the wonder of the Lord, and he will delight in the Lord.

Many: A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on Earth.

One: With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the Earth. He will strike the Earth with the rod of his mouth. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

Many: The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and the little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest.

One: They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the Earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Many: The Lord has said these things I will do; I will not forsake you.

—*Tim Powell*

People, Look East

A Meditation

Lately I have been worshipping with the Quakers. The Meeting House I go to was built in 1788 by farmers. It is a shingled rectangular structure, two stories high, with balconies running along either side. People sit in the original rustic wooden pews, cut and assembled by the long-dead faithful. Over time the pews have acquired a patina; many hands have smoothed edges that must once have been rough. The light fixtures—"chandeliers" seems far too grand a word—are original as well: centers that are punched cones of tin, with radiating arms that used to hold candles made from beeswax, and now sprout electric bulbs.

Today is the second Sunday in Advent, but in this place, there are no advent candles, no advent hymns, no Scripture readings about messengers preparing the way. I simply sit with others, here in this simple building with its old timbers, in the silence that is not silence at all, just time without human speech or composed music. I sit, and wait, and wait, wondering what the silence will bring forth.

This space is not so far from a stable. I imagine the presence of sheep and cows, a patient donkey. *The balcony could easily be a hayloft.* Ghosts of shepherds, of Quaker farmers, quiver in the air. And here I am, too, waiting. Waiting, if not for the Word made Flesh, at least for Words emerging from the flesh of someone here, in this room. The silence is pregnant, full as Mary's belly must have been. *Will someone speak? Will I? Has the labor begun?* I had forgotten how anxious this time is, just before birth. So much can go wrong. So much is unknown.

Outside a train pulls into the station, then out, heading east. *People, look East, the time is near...* words from an advent hymn I didn't know I knew, come to mind. *The time is near...Love, the Guest, is on the way.* Inside, there are the rustlings of bodies. People stir, as though about to rise, and speak. *What will he say?*

The Messenger Comes

The Messenger comes in a thin beam of light,
piercing the darkness;
the divine Word enters through a space
no thicker than a razor,
where life and death, past and future
touch upon each other;
the still-point center-hinge of time
where the inner door opens
on fathomless skies
new-lit with the light of wonder,
the rising of the New Star.

The beam arrives
in the meeting
of the eyes,
in a newborn
baby's cry,
in a child's s
earching gaze,
in a moment's
amazement,
sudden wonder and
surprise,
and in ways often
harder to recognize:
**in the songbird fallen
from its nest,
the one who's different from the rest,
the wanderer in search of the soul,
the dream with nowhere else to go,
the truth expelled from places on high,
the beauty defaced, the innocence denied,
the hope of the world being thrown away
year by year and day by day.**

And the question always remains,
if the Light came, who would see?
If the knock came, who would heed?
Would the Messenger be recognized,
the message be received?
Will the Virgin wake into Madonna,
will something in her still respond,
"May it be done unto me
according to thy word"?

Day by day and all around us,
in the dark and empty space within us,
the secret Angel asks admittance,
the Messiah seeks a womb
of which to be born.

Silent Gabriel

—Tom Hoornstra





Taking Flight

*Over my head, I hear music in the air.
There must be a God somewhere
(American Spiritual)*

On this dark and cold, cold day,
made holy in the Swedish way,
when the light of the candles and warmth of the song
brought smiles to my mother's waning days,
And a far-away phone call the lilting arc
of my mother-in-law's late loving life
in glowing words to take
to heart, sanctifying
precious hours,
Life itself sent me flying
out in the wintry air
to seek abundant
stores of food
for body
and soul
for Christmas Day
I drop and stopped, gathered and drove
myself through wintry wind and cold
'till I received, till I heard,
music in the air!
I looked up, beyond me far,
high above, a symphony,
now, over my head, now
twenty-seven in a V,
yielding, shifting
moving onward, spending all,
each other lifting,
'till at last, beyond the gloam
In warmth and light -
Must be Home.

—Jackie Gibbons

What Message might she bring?

But they shift positions, remain seated. If they were going to speak, they have changed their minds. *How long has it been? How much time remains?* I have no watch on; there is no clock; I have no answer, just an awareness, *the time is near.*

Someone stands, and shakes another's hand—the signal that the Meeting is over. In the hour of waiting, no one broke the hushed, heavy stillness. Somehow, it seems right, appropriate to the season, that we all remain in suspense.

In this wordless time, this humble space, I have participated in the season of Advent, anticipating with hope and with fear the coming of a Love that will change the world. A Love that might even change me. I leave as I entered, still waiting, still wondering, still pondering.

—Betsy Scheurman



Poems, and Prayers of the Season

Welcome to the pages of the Christmas offering from the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship. This small journal invites us to visit each of the very real stations of grief and memory, new gestation, birth and the return of Light. Our authors hold their candles, beckoning you forward.

We begin our journey first with the sound of loss. We have only to look at the “nurse tree” in the forest, her falling body raising crops of moss, fantastical mushrooms and tender new trees to understand that God has built into the Book of Nature, as well as our own DNA, the great return of Light, life and promise. Let us step out on this path now, together, as a People of God.

Kimberly Beyer-Nelson

Good News Co-Editor

Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship

December Mourning December Mourning

Still bereft,
Weighed down by winter cold,
I sing my mantra, “Going Home,”
And the birds begin to come—
First one, then two,
then quickly three



Then some more—so close to me—
Through the pane—bird by bird
Despite the cold—bringing word
Of love and hope and common cheer-

Cardinals

To my mother, dear,
The state bird of Illinois —
Here in Texas peace and joy.

—*Jackie Gibbons*

